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E.O. 12958: DECL: 2020/01/26

TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM BL

SUBJECT: BOLIVIAN PRESIDENT ANNOUNCES CABINET CHANGES

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State, La Paz; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶11. (C) Summary: Bolivian President Evo Morales announced January 23 sweeping changes to his cabinet, replacing fourteen of twenty ministers, including the key posts of defense, government and the presidency. Foreign Minister Choquehuanca and Economy and Finance Minister Arce were among the six re-confirmed for Morales's second term, signaling some measure of continuity in foreign affairs and economic policy. The departures of Presidency Minister Quintana and Government Minister Rada, both hard-liners opposed to improved relations with the U.S., came as welcome news, but their replacements are not expected to bring significant changes to policy. The overhaul of the cabinet, which is now divided evenly between men and women, and includes more indigenous and social group representatives, reflects Morales's determination to effect the "renovation" of the Bolivian state. End summary.

¶12. (SBU) Just a day after pronouncing his cabinet "the greatest in history," President Morales January 23 announced that the great majority of them would be replaced, effective immediately. Morales sacked thirteen of his twenty ministers, including Presidency Minister Juan Ramon Quintana, Government Minister Alfredo Rada, and Defense Minister Walker San Miguel, and elevated one, Hydrocarbons Minister Oscar Coca Antezana, to replace Quintana at the palace. In their place, Morales named a diverse but largely unknown group of technocrats, social group representatives, and loyalists, creating a new cabinet that, according to the GOB, reflects Bolivia's "plurinational" character and gender equality.

¶13. (C) Some new ministers are known to us, while others have even Bolivian political analysts scratching their heads. Oscar Antezana is widely regarded as a capable official, having served previously as Hydrocarbons Minister and Planning Minister, with roots in the Bolivian Communist Party and Morales's stronghold Chapare region. New Government Minister Sacha Llorenti was nominated by Morales in 2006 as ambassador to the U.S. (forced to withdraw because of lack of Senate support), has served as Vice Minister for Coordination with Social Movements, and participated in last year's bilateral talks on a framework agreement. Llorenti is regarded as close to hard-line Marxist Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera and frequently echoes the vice president's stridently anti-American views. Much less is known about other new appointees. Some, such as Planning Minister Elba Caro Hinojosa and Defense Minister Ruben Saavedra Soto, have good professional reputations, but we have little direct experience with which to gauge their interest in bilateral cooperation. We have little information at all beyond official biographic sketches on several new ministers.

¶4. (C) Quintana's and Rada's departures were hailed by both the opposition and MAS-affiliated social groups who had become alienated by their heavy-handed approaches and had demanded their removal. Both had long been regarded as members of Morales's inner circle, and as fierce opponents of improved relations with the United States. Rada's dismissal was no doubt influenced by his failure to prevent former opposition candidate Manfred Reyes Villa from fleeing the country, which Rada himself acknowledged.

Quintana's removal seems more complicated, especially given his apparent strength until recently. Whether he departed due to pressure from social groups, Morales's wariness of his accumulated power or some other reason (his stated one of resigning for personal reasons) we may never know. Still, we expect that Quintana will continue to play an "unofficial" role in shaping GOB policies.

¶5. (C) Comment: Despite Morales' s effusive praise for his cabinet during January 22 inauguration ceremonies, the Bolivian president's decision to bring in a largely new team is consistent with his efforts to demonstrate the "renovation" of the state, through sweeping personnel as well as legal and symbolic changes. His MAS party's majority delegation in parliament is composed almost entirely of new members, with substantially higher representation from indigenous and social groups. He has also "renovated" the national police and military commands (septels). From our perspective, keeping FM Choquehuanca (a proponent of dialogue with the U.S.) in place is better than the likely alternatives. We are pleased to see Quintana and Rada go, but Garcia Linera's continued key role means that their successors (who have vowed to continue or improve upon their predecessors' work) will likely continue their hard-line policies.

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